https://www.eeagender.org/the-synergy-network/news/we-need-to-listen-to-the-voice-of-roma-women/

"We need to listen to the voice of Roma women"

"The issue of violence against Roma women should not be perceived as a ‘Roma problem’ or as an accepted cultural norm that goes unnoticed by the authorities,” according to Aida Farkas from the Council of Europe's Anti-Discrimination Department.

BY VIBEKE HOEM, VIBEKE@KILDEN.FORSKNINGSRADET.NO | PUBLISHED 8 JUNE 2023



The importance of implementing targeted measures to ensure that Roma women have equal access to justice, is one of the issues Aida Farkas from the Council of Europe will address in her keynote speech. (Photo: Private)

"However, their access to justice, prevention measures, prosecution, and protection is complicated by various factors," Aida Farkas writes in an email.

She is part of a project dealing with the rights of Roma and Traveller women to be free from violence and is also a Roma woman herself.

"These factors are deep-rooted antigypsyism, structural disadvantages, fear of reporting, and the fact that these women belong to a marginalised group that is exposed to multiple forms of disadvantage."

Farkas will be one of the keynote speakers at the conference in Bulgaria on 15 June. The conference's primary focus is the importance of involving Roma women in programming and prevention efforts (see more in the fact box).

Read also: Upcoming conference: How to ensure Roma women's rights to be free from violence?

A history of forced sterilisation

The importance of implementing targeted measures to ensure that Roma women have equal access to justice, particularly in cases of violence against them, is one of the issues Farkas will address in her keynote speech.

Farkas wants to remind people that Roma women have a history of forced sterilisation in several central and eastern European countries, and that cases have been brought before the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR).

"The court concluded that the practice of sterilisation amounts to inhumane and degrading treatment and thus constitutes a violation of article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Some of these women are still trying to receive compensation."

Forced sterilisation was practiced by the state in various European countries such as Slovakia between 1966 and 2004.

Roma women face multi-dimensional discrimination

To ensure that Roma women have equal access to prevention, prosecution, and protection measures in cases of violence, Farkas believes it is crucial to identify their specific needs.

"This can only be accomplished through meaningful consultation and with the active participation of Roma women and relevant organisations."

> The participation of Roma women and Roma NGOs has been vitally important because it is their voice that needs to be heard and it is their opinions, experiences and needs that must be addressed

Roma women still face multi-dimensional discrimination and intersectional inequalities. Farkas points out the intersecting forms of discrimination that are evident across such areas as education, employment, access to healthcare, access to justice, and access to services.

"This concern has been highlighted by the Council of Europe's monitoring bodies and the Council of Europe Roma and Travellers Team," Farkas explains.

She believes that acknowledging the profound impact of the intersection between antigypsyism, sexism and other forms of discrimination is of the utmost importance.

"Potentially, this convergence may not only undermine the lives of Roma women but also render them invisible within both the larger societal system and in their own communities," Farkas writes.

See also: Violence in Sámi communities: From too frightened to touch, to openness

Leading by example: "It's their voice that needs to be heard"

This project serves as an exemplary model of using a participatory approach, as Roma Women and representatives from Roma women civil society organisations are included in the steering committee.



"We are are extremely grateful that such an event is taking place in Bulgaria. It gives the opportunity for people working on the ground, experts and NGOs to unite efforts towards Roma women being free from violence," Lubov Panayotova, the director of the European Institute, explains. (Photo: European Institute)

"Their invaluable insights into the realities faced by Roma women when it comes to violence and the challenges encountered when seeking justice have greatly enriched our understanding," Farkas points out.

The director of the European Institute, Ms. Lubov Panayotova, agrees with Farkas.

"The participation of Roma women and Roma NGOs has been vitally important because it is their voice that needs to be heard and it is their opinions, experiences and needs that must be considered and addressed," Panayotova writes.

Lene Nilsen, from the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and public security (NMOJ), agrees that it is time that Roma women and NGOs had a greater impact on how gender-based violence is



Senior adviser Lene Nilsen, from the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and public security, hopes that the conference results in mutual learning and networking. (Photo: Private)

addressed.

NMOJ is managing the project together with the European Institute Foundation and also co-organised the conference with the Council of Europe (see fact box). Nilsen believes that it is currently a good time in the EEA and Norway Grants programme cycle for this aspect to be included.

"At this stage, it is possible for promotors and partners to share project experiences and perhaps get inspiration for future activities," Nilsen explains.

A crucial participatory approach

Farkas also believes that the EEA and Norway Grants mechanism can play a crucial role. She explains that domestic violence and other issues related to the Roma community are programme areas that receive substantial support through this mechanism.

"This conference is a direct outcome of merging these programme areas, with the primary objective of discussing, among other topics, the importance of involving Roma women in programming and prevention efforts."

"To effectively address the issues faced by Roma women, it is crucial to engage with them directly in order to identify their specific needs and ensure their continuous participation, including in the monitoring and follow-up of the project," Farkas explains.

In its Project Management Methodology, the Council of Europe promotes the application of a human rights approach throughout all stages of a project, with a strong focus on a participatory approach.

"All projects should adopt the human rights approach and ensure equality and diversity in line with crosscutting issues," Farkas highlights.

"A step towards Roma women being free from violence"

As part of the project, the challenges that Roma women face in terms of their access to justice have been identified and examined by two international experts in the field, Rachel Eapen Paul on



The upcoming conference provides a valuable opportunity to discuss potential solutions to the challenges faced by Roma women, according to Jenna Shearer Demir from the Council of Europe. (Photo: Private)

gender-based violence (Norway) and Zora Popova on minority rights (Bulgaria).

This will result in a handbook on how to consider and take into account the rights and needs of Roma women in the EEA and Norway Grants programmes that address gender-based and domestic violence.

Program adviser, Jenna Shearer Demir from the Gender Equality Division in the Council of Europe, perceives the publication of the handbook as a tangible outcome of the conference.

"This publication will provide guidance to strengthen EEA and Norway Grants' programmes on preventing and combating gender-based and domestic violence. Through this publication, we aim to support countries' commitment to improving existing and future programmes addressing these critical issues, Shearer Demir writes in an email.

During the project, the experts had the opportunity to see the situation in Bulgaria from the perspective of people working in Roma NGOs, national institutions, and other Bulgarian and international private and public bodies.

"During the conference, the experts will present the challenges identified and will explore best practices through a set of workshops that will give participants a space to interact, exchange knowledge and experience, and accumulate new ideas," Panayotova explains.

Jeremy Moakes, from Council of Europe, will be one of the moderators and will help participants to advance their thinking and unify various contributions during the conference.

"I plan to draw attention to any points raised that will help us move forward on issues surrounding prevention, protection and prosecution of violence against all women", writes Moakes, Head of Digital Communications and Editorial Division at the Directorate of Communication, in an email.

Moakes will also highlight any points made that help establish common ground on specific challenges faced by women in Roma communities, and of course the achievements and lessons



learnt from projects.

Jeremy Moakes, head of digital communications and editorial division, will be one of the moderators. (Photo: Sandro Weltin, Council of Europe)

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